

Czech Republic

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Freedom of the Press

Freedom of the press is constitutionally guaranteed, though the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms prohibits speech that might infringe on national security, individual rights, public health, or morality, or that may evoke hatred based on race, ethnicity, or national origin. Libel remains a criminal offense, but prosecutions are rare, and offenders have received only suspended sentences in recent years. Political satire has a long history in the country, and the courts often side with the media, protecting caricature as a valid form of criticism. The Press Law provides a sound basis for independent journalism, and media protections have been bolstered by Constitutional Court and other institutional rulings. According to the Institute for the Protection of Journalists, members of the Czech Syndicate of Journalists—the largest professional organization of journalists in the country—are “often consulted on media matters by judges.”

Freedom of information is provided for under the law. In 2011 the legislature amended the controversial 2009 “muzzle law,” which banned the publication of information—particularly the names of individuals—obtained from police wiretaps, as well as information about individuals involved in criminal acts (both victims and perpetrators). Violators were subject to exorbitant fines and up to five years’ imprisonment. Critics complained that the law hindered reporting on corruption cases. The amendment makes an exception for information considered to be of “public interest,” though courts retain the authority to determine whether the level of public interest outweighs the privacy rights of those involved. In 2010, legislators had already softened the law to allow journalists to publish the names of politicians or other state officials involved in criminal proceedings related to corruption, and reduced the severity of the prescribed punishments.

Broadcast media are regulated by the Council for Radio and Television Broadcasting, while the public-service station Czech Television (CT) is regulated by its own council. Print media are largely self-regulated.

Media outlets are generally free from political interference. Paid political advertising is prohibited in the electronic media, and CT adopted internal guidelines for the preelection period in 2012. Media coverage of elections in 2013 was balanced; however, some of the newspapers were criticized for publicly endorsing one of the presidential candidates. Andrej Babiš, a wealthy Czech businessman who bought the publishing house MAFRA in July 2013, was accused of interfering with editorial policy a few days after the purchase. He apologized and suggested the creation of a new ethics code. There were allegations of censorship and political interference at the public television station as well. Several broadcast journalists were fired in September, and an investigation was launched to assess accusations of censorship on behalf of editors loyal to President Miloš Zeman. Physical attacks and harassment aimed at journalists or media outlets are rare.

National print media consist of a variety of daily newspapers, weeklies, and magazines representing diverse viewpoints, though the economic crisis that began in late 2008 has had a lasting effect on the media market, leading to several consecutive years of decline. Media-related legislation includes minimal ownership restrictions, and none on foreign ownership. The industry had been characterized by a very high share of foreign ownership, but this has changed in recent years with the entry of Czech business tycoons. The restructuring of ownership culminated in 2013 with the purchase of the two largest publishing companies, MAFRA and a joint venture of Switzerland’s Ringier and Germany’s Alex Springer, by Babiš

and the influential Czech entrepreneurs Daniel Křetínský and Patrik Tkáč, respectively. These developments have led to a concentration of ownership and influence, and critics warned of “Berlusconization”—or powerful individuals’ use of media assets to influence politics—after the success of Babiš’s party in the October 2013 parliamentary elections.

There are three broadcasting companies operating at the national level: one public—CT, with four channels—and two private—TV Nova and Prima TV. The switchover to digital broadcasting in June 2012 resulted in a more diverse media sector, featuring the launch of several new television channels. Most electronic media outlets are privately owned. Media advocates have expressed concern that while public media are widely respected, their financial sustainability is being undermined by tighter control of public funds and increasing restrictions on advertising. Observers also point to a decline in the depth and quality of reporting in Czech news media, with weak accountability among the tabloids in particular, which have gained popularity at the expense of the traditional press. Television remains the main source of information, but the internet continues to develop rapidly as a news source, with 74 percent of the population enjoying regular and unrestricted access in 2013.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)

20

Legal Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

4

Political Environment

(0 = best, 40 = worst)

8

Economic Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

8